Chapter

3

What are the qualities of an effective board?

How do you know when a board is an effective governing body?

S o you said yes when asked to serve on the board. You have been to at least three meetings and are finally feeling like you are comfortable enough with the group to share your ideas and thoughts. The trouble is you are not sure how you can contribute in a meaningful way to the organization. Why?

Just sitting through a meeting and voting does not motivate people to be committed to an organization. Board members need to see the results of their involvement and participation, not just make it through another meeting. They need to connect what they do with what the organization needs from them. In order to be effective, boards need to feel that they are making a difference.

How do you know when a board is an effective governing body? How can you generate the synergy so evident in some organization's boards and so obviously missing in others? Let's take apart an effective, synergetic board and look at the components. These components are, in effect, the same as those seen in effective teamwork. In essence, building a productive nonprofit board is teambuilding. The very nature of the mission of nonprofits is to work as a team. The following are effective team characteristics and suggested ways to promote that characteristic within your nonprofit board:

Individual board members work together, unselfishly, in a coordinated effort to accomplish similar goals. This is evidenced by a 'we' orientation in communication and behavior rather than a 'me' orientation. Ways to promote this characteristic include:
- Establish clarity about mission and vision of the organization.
- Continually ask for input from board members as the organization works on long term planning.

- Make the mission statement a part of every conversation about policies and programs.

There is an open communication climate among members.   Interaction is encouraged and everyone feels that her/his opinion is valued.
- Establish a trust level by allowing board members to get to know each other personally at outside social events or board retreats.
- Structure meetings so everyone has a chance to voice opinions and no one is criticized for their input. Sometimes just having a round robin or brainstorming session about an issue will contribute to this open climate.
- Encourage board members to use descriptive language rather than language that is evaluative. An example of this is: "She has only participated in the discussion a few times. (Descriptive) versus the statement, "She is too passive and never wants to contribute to the discussion." (Evaluative)

Members are interdependent.   They realize the strengths of individual members and depend on each other to accomplish their shared goals.
- Continually assess current board member strengths and talents.
- When a new board position opens, look for people with strengths and talents that will add to the collective ability of the board to accomplish the mission.

Board members agree upon a set of operating procedures and decision-making norms and continually assess their performance within those procedures, making changes as needed.
- A yearly personal evaluation as well as a team evaluation should be the norm. Sample evaluation forms are included in this handbook on page 51.

Conflict is not avoided but acknowledged as inevitable.
Members deal with conflicting opinions in an open, non-threatening climate.
- When conflict arises, have a procedure to allow all opinions to be voiced and decisions made so everyone feels the conflict has been addressed. This may involve appointing a special committee to evaluate the issue or postponing the final decision until the climate is less emotionally charged.   Do not, however, avoid the conflict altogether unless the issue is deemed too trivial to spend time on.

- In some cases, a conflict resolution plan should be developed and implemented. When conflict becomes a personal issue for some board members or is continuously interfering with the decision making of the board, intervention is needed. An agreed upon plan can facilitate that intervention.
- Often, conflict can be avoided by changing the structure of the board meeting to minimize opportunities for negative or personal attacks. For example, using a consent agenda can keep the board focused on more pertinent issues. Chapter Four discusses meeting structure further. Some types of decision making can also create a more competitive environment. If you find this to be the case, discuss this as a board and look at other possibilities that promote a more collaborative approach.
- Conflict can be a growth experience and often contributes to the trust level within the group.

Board members value their membership in the group and want to remain in the group because they derive satisfaction from interacting with each other.

- Be sure to address membership needs with outside social events, board retreats, pre-performance gatherings, etc.
- Continually check the "climate" of the group by asking board members how they are feeling about being on the board.

There is nothing more satisfying than being part of an enthusiastic, synergetic group who accomplish their goals. When a board culture encourages a teambuilding attitude and has these characteristics of an effective team, problems with recruiting and retaining board members disappear. **Effective boards build strong organizations and strong communities.**

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IDEAS & TOOLS TO USE THIS INFORMATION
(In addition to the suggestions already addressed under each quality)

As a Board Member:
- Adapt a 'we orientation' and overcome the desire to compete with others in the group.
- Realize your own strengths and contribute them freely to accomplish goals of the organization. Learn to depend on others and value what they offer to the group.
- Learn to embrace diversity in all forms. Be descriptive rather than evaluative when you have a different opinion. Be open to new methods and ideas.
- Always ask for clarification of information if you are not sure you understand.
- Keep the mission of the organization in mind during any decision making process.
- Understand the policies and procedures of the board.

As a Board Chair:
- Educate new members on the group norms and decision-making procedures.
- Encourage an open discussion climate. Set the tone for idea sharing and open participation.
- Recognize the strengths of individuals and how they can contribute to the whole.
- When conflict arises, recognize it and encourage an open, descriptive discussion of the issues. If the conversations taking place in the parking lot after the meeting are longer than those in the meeting, you know members are not truly sharing with the group.
- Incorporate assessment into board meetings to allow the board members to give feedback about other members, individual issues and group norms that they may not raise with the whole board.
- Value everyone's perspective.

As an Executive Director:

- Share information with the board that they need to know in order to make collective decisions on policy.
- Adapt a "we orientation" in your communication.
- Recognize and value strengths of individual board members.
- Even though you are not a voting member, realize your role in setting the tone of cohesiveness. You are the link between the day-to-day realities of the organization and the decisions of the board.
- Be open to new ideas and methods. Be willing to make changes in order to meet organizational goals.